

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?: THE 'MARGINALISATION' OF ITINERANT PEOPLE<sup>i</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper responds to one aspect of Abdurrahman Umar's review (1999) of *Beyond the ferris wheel* (Danaher, 1998), the criticism that the book paid insufficient attention to the 'marginalisation' of Queensland show people. The author argues that the term can too readily be associated with 'essential', 'positivist' and politicised accounts of the lives of itinerant people. The author's response to the question of 'naming' itinerant people raised by this issue is to engage in continuous interrogation of the naming strategies used by researchers, and to argue for self-reflexiveness as a prerequisite of theorising nomadic and Traveller education.

This paper responds to Abdurrahman Umar's review (1999) of a book, *Beyond the ferris wheel: Educating Queensland show children* (Danaher, 1998), edited by myself and written with several colleagues at Central Queensland University in Australia. The book examines the consumption by Queensland itinerant show or fairground people of an educational program for their children for which they lobbied and which was operated by the Brisbane School of Distance Education.

Like Australian historian Alan Atkinson (1999, p. 48), "I'm aware of the etiquette which stops authors from answering reviewers and I can see the point of it". In Atkinson's case, he sought to write "an essay which offers some broad pattern for debate" and out of a sense of frustration "to find that the purpose [of his work] is not well understood" (p. 48). In my case, I seek to contribute to an ongoing and crucial debate that goes to the heart of how we theorise the field of nomadic and Traveller education.

I should begin by acknowledging that Umar's review of my colleagues' and my book is fair, frank and reasonable. That my response to the review is manifestly not a case of 'sour grapes' is clear from my acknowledgment below of the force of the bulk of his critique. My sole purpose in writing this paper is to draw attention to a broader question with which all researchers in nomadic and Traveller education need to grapple, in some form or other.

Umar's criticisms of *Beyond the ferris wheel* are threefold. Firstly, he notes "the researchers' exclusive focus on the consumers of education and the neglect of 'the assumptions and actions of policy-makers'" (p. 93). Furthermore, "An analysis of the objectives and assumptions underlying the educational program for Show people would have illuminated the researchers' findings on the 'tactics of consumption' used by Show people to resist attempts to marginalise them" (p. 93). This point is well made; in any book, the balance between what is included and what is omitted for reasons of space or because it has received less emphasis from the researcher/s is always a matter of debate, but Umar has identified a significant issue that will be helpful to us in planning future stages of the research.

Secondly, Umar's review "calls for a more critical attitude towards the respondents [*sic*] accounts and raises questions about the accuracy of such accounts given the fact that their account[s] of their situations...have been conditioned by certain structural, ideological and external factors such that they may have a 'limited' understanding of their situation" (p. 95). Again I find this suggestion persuasive. Indeed, Chapter Four of the book was intended to signal an awareness of the ethical and political dimensions of conducting and reporting Traveller education research, but I take Umar's point that this awareness needs to extend to a fundamental examination of the methodology underpinning the research.

Thirdly, Umar argues that the definition of 'marginalisation' "encompasses much more than what the authors are willing to allow", and that "The ability of the Show people to lobby and struggle for [an] educational program is not in itself sufficient evidence that they are not marginalised" (p. 94). Moreover, "more data on their position and objective conditions in the political economy of Australia may be required before one can be sure of whether they are marginalised or not" (p. 94; emphasis in original).

At one level, I concur with Umar's criticism. By this I mean that I perceive a parallel with the frustration that I feel when an ill-informed commentator claims that Indigenous Australians receive 'special benefits' that place them 'above' the level of 'ordinary Australians', as though there is some kind of a 'level playing field' involved rather than the outcomes of almost two hundred and thirty years of colonial and postcolonial history that render the situation of Indigenous Australians anything but 'special'. That is, Umar is right to focus attention on the "position" of a group of itinerant people in relation to the broader society in which they are located.

In other crucial respects, however, I argue differently from Umar about the 'marginalisation' of itinerant people. My reasons for doing so are fourfold. Firstly, a key

element of my colleagues' and my ambivalence about describing the Queensland show people as 'marginalised' was "our unwillingness to ascribe automatically to all show people the mantle of marginalisation in any essential form—to do so would be to ignore the existence of heterogeneity and context as outlined here" (Danaher, 1998, p. 18). From this perspective, even if it is accepted that a group of people can be simultaneously heterogeneous (in terms of financial and cultural capital) and marginalised (which presumably addresses Umar's point that marginalisation "encompasses much more than what the authors are willing to allow" [p. 94]), too great a readiness to use the term 'marginalised' can, in my view, do more to disguise than to illuminate social relations within and among groups.

Secondly, while there is an obvious danger in analysing a term out of context and thereby potentially exaggerating its significance, Umar's reference to the necessity of supplying "more data on...[the] objective conditions" (p. 94; emphasis in original) of the show people is suggestive. My own preference is to eschew the 'objectivity'–'subjectivity' dichotomy for a focus on floating signifiers as contingent and dynamic markers of identity. My colleagues' and my choice of "slippery" to refer to the concepts of 'marginalisation' and 'mainstream' (Danaher, 1998, p. 43) was deliberate, and drew attention to both "the context in which they are discussed and the speaking position of the person discussing them" (p. 43). In other words, my reading of Umar's reference to "objective conditions" – a reading that might be mistaken, given the lack of space in his review to develop this point – is that it is more positivist than, and therefore less appropriate to, the conceptual framework underpinning *Beyond the ferris wheel*.

Thirdly, groups sometimes claim for themselves the descriptor 'marginalised' as part of a political strategy (G. R. Danaher, personal communication, 4 August 1999). Whether they are 'objectively' 'marginalised' is less important than their perception that they can use that status to gain access to power or resources. An apposite example of this was Kiddle's (1999b, p. 127) account of Gypsy Travellers exaggerating the stereotypes directed against them in order to attract customers. This highlights anew the 'slipperiness' of the term 'marginalised', and prompts questions such as "Who is using the term about whom for what political purpose(s)?".

Fourthly, and from the opposite perspective, I feel increasingly uncomfortable about using terms such as 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' to depict groups of people with whom I conduct research. I recall vividly that a prominent English fairground proprietor, who was also an educational researcher with whom I did some collaborative writing, noted,

“[The] concept of ‘marginalisation’ seemed very extreme and alien to both outsiders’ & showmen’s perceptions of the showmen’s way of life” (R. T. Pullin, personal communication, 16 October 1996). More recently Kiddle (1999b, p. 17) communicated a variation on this theme when she expressed her “concerns about terminology as labelling, classifying and naming people, which is an implicitly political act placing the group at a certain point in existing power relationships”.<sup>ii</sup>

From this perspective, calling another group ‘marginalised’ can be demeaning and offensive, particularly if it is interpreted that they are ‘marginalised’ ‘inherently’ because of their ontological status (as female, nomadic, young or whatever) – a point that hearkens back to my earlier concern about marginalisation “in any essential form” (Danaher, 1998, p. 18). Although the point of the comparison is dulled because of the differential in cultural capital, I would certainly not enjoy being called ‘marginalised’ or ‘embattled’ (a favourite Australian media catchphrase) on account of working in an Australian regional teacher education faculty in a context where Australian regional universities are held by some commentators not to be the appropriate recipients of research funding.

To elaborate this point, which to me is crucial for nomadic and Traveller education research, I cite the feminist author bell hooks (1990, p. 343), who explained how “Often this speech about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases”:

*No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority, I am still colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk.* (emphasis in original)

For me, hooks has crystallised my uncomfortable ambivalence about describing Queensland show people as ‘marginalised’. She has highlighted my potential complicity in ‘capturing’ an ‘essence’ of the show people and, by analysing it in public, academic fora, in replicating rather than transforming it. This is my understanding of why Tucker (1990), in her “Director’s foreword” to the volume containing hooks’s essay, called marginalisation “that complex and disputatious process by means of which certain people and ideas are privileged over others at any given time” (p. 7). My fear is that by using the term about other people I can potentially contribute to “that complex and disputatious process” when I am actually attempting to deconstruct it.

I do not suggest for one moment that Umar's (1999) recommendation that my colleagues and I should not dismiss 'marginalisation' so easily reflected his complicity in the strategies outlined by hooks (1990). Instead, I seek to highlight the broader question confronting all nomadic and Traveller education researchers: "What's in a name?". That is, what kinds of words should we use to characterise the people with whom we are researching, and how do we engage with the type of power differential to which hooks has alluded?

My response to this crucial question is contained in my account of the ethical and political dimensions of researching educational itinerancy (Danaher, 1998, pp. 57-69). Specifically, I argue the need to "acknowledge the multiple realities of the researcher's experience, and contend that the ethical questions arising out of these should be constantly interrogated as part of the researcher's responsibility to the project and to the research participants" (p. 57). A fundamental element of research being "constantly interrogated" in this way is a continuing appraisal of the terms that we use to describe research participants, and an ongoing consideration of the effects of such terms on the people so described.

Kiddle (1999b) provided a timely object lesson in this regard in her negotiation through what she called "this minefield of appropriate terminology" (p. 17). She traced carefully shifts in connotation of terms like 'Gypsy', 'Traveller' and 'Showmen', and she related those shifts to wider issues of identity and power. She justified her selection of particular terms to be used in her book, and she acknowledged that specific terms were used in some contexts but not in others. Her overriding concern was explicit: "So to reflect the diversity of groupings, the diversity of attitude and self identification, I have used a variety of different terms through the pages of this book" (p. 20). Yet the orientation of her underlying approach was equally clear: "Certainly every term is used with respect; respect for all cultural groups and respect for individuals within groups who choose to identify themselves in particular ways" (p. 20).

Recently I compared the educational opportunities and experiences of Australian show and circus people (Danaher, 1999). In that comparison, I claimed that "My particular contribution" to the research team to which I belong "has been to elaborate elements of marginalisation theory...as they apply to nomadic people" (p. 25). Furthermore, I depicted show and circus people as being "marginalised from conventional sources of power, status and wealth" (p. 26), and I referred to the impact of "Marginalising stereotypes" (p. 26) on popular (mis)conceptions of itinerancy. However, I also asserted, "Of course, this kind of marginalisation is the beginning, not the end, of the matter" (p. 26), a claim that I justified by

emphasising show and circus people's "exercise of their social agency to resist the deleterious effects of marginalisation" (p. 26).

This account of marginalisation highlights two aspects of my discussion in this paper. Firstly, I advocate its self-conscious use, rather than its abandonment. By this I mean that researchers describing a group of itinerant people as 'marginalised' need to reflect critically on why they are doing so and to what effect, along the lines outlined above. Secondly, I give more analytical weight to 'agency' than to 'marginalisation', reflecting my greater interest in how itinerant people engage with the broader society in which they are located. This follows Tucker's (1990, p. 7) observation: "None of us chooses our race, our gender, our age, or our country of origin, nor can we do anything to change them. But while these factors are outside our control, how we position ourselves in relation to them is very much a matter of choice".

I have employed Umar's (1999) criticism of my colleagues' and my (Danaher, 1998) (non-)use of the term 'marginalised' to draw attention to what I regard as a crucial issue confronting all nomadic and Traveller education researchers: how do we 'call' the research participants? I have argued that 'marginalised' is a 'slippery' signifier that can be deployed for political ends of which the user may be unaware or disapproving. I contend that the question of "what's in a name?" goes to the heart of how we theorise nomadic and Traveller education, because it encapsulates our politicised assumptions about and attitudes towards the people (with) whom we are researching. Finally, I assert that a vital prerequisite of that theorisation is our capacity for self-reflexiveness about the intentions and the outcomes of using terms such as 'marginalisation' about itinerant people.

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- i. I am grateful to Dr Geoffrey Danaher for his helpful advice on the approach taken in this paper. Responsibility for the views expressed here remains with myself.
  - ii. This reference to Kiddle is a timely reminder that her review (Kiddle, 1999a) of *Beyond the ferris wheel* contained a fourth criticism of the book: "I was, though, disappointed at the casual reference to Gypsies as ... 'Living a relatively loosely transient lifestyle' ... in comparing the itinerancy of groups and believe that if the research team conducted a similarly detailed study of a Gypsy group they might well revisit that assumption" (p. 71). Kiddle's (1999b) study of English Gypsy Travellers more than compensates for this omission from my colleagues' and my research.